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AUTHOR Fiscus, Edward D.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA), a method of meeting the nondiscriminatory assessment requirements of P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act). The need for nondiscriminatory assessment and types of nondiscriminatory tests (such as culture fair, culture specific, and Piagetian tasks) are briefly described. Basic purposes of SOMPA (such as reducing stigmatization and fostering multicultural education) are noted as are SOMPA assumptions (such as the equivalent value of all cultures). SOMPA is described as being composed of three assessment models: (1) the medical model which attempts to screen for biological anomalies and includes measures of physical dexterity, vision/auditory acuity, and health history; (2) the social systems model which evaluates whether the child is meeting social norms of his/her own group and includes such measures as the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children with scoring based on cultural group norms; and (3) the pluralistic model which determines learning potential and uses the Social Cultural Scales and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised with scores interpreted using social-cultural norms. The assessment procedure and suggested division of labor on assessment teams are outlined. The text of federal regulations pertaining to nondiscriminatory assessment is provided. The paper concludes with consideration of conceptual and statistical criticisms of SOMPA including the large numbers of students declassified as handicapped when it is used and problems of determining predictive validity. (DB)

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Nondiscriminatory Assessment and the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA)

Paper Presented at the CEC Topical Conference on the Exceptional Black Child

by

Session Leader: Edward D. Fiscus, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Special Education
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Session Participants:

Alex B. Johnson, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Special Education
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Colleen J. Mandell, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Special Education
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

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Nondiscriminatory Assessment and the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA)

Introduction

Public Law 94-142 has mandated the use of nondiscriminatory educational assessment procedures in making decisions regarding the placement of handicapped children. This requirement, in spite of the apparent lack of appropriate technology to fulfill it, is often described by educators as just another example of the federal government telling us to do something that cannot be done. Unfortunately, this requirement is often ignored or subverted. The ignoring or subversion of the nondiscriminatory assessment requirement has crucial implications and significance for handicapped children, especially those who are black and/or culturally different in addition to being handicapped.

An assessment system is now available which does much to meet the nondiscriminatory assessment requirements of PL 94-142. It is recommended that while nondiscriminatory assessment procedures are being developed, researched and refined, the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) be utilized more extensively. A survey conducted by Telzrow in Ohio in 1980 disclosed that only a few school districts were using SOMPA. However, 64% of those persons that had used SOMPA reported that SOMPA had "some" or "considerable" impact on their placement decisions.

Need for Nondiscriminatory Assessment

It has been pointed out by some that the term, nondiscriminatory assessment, is in fact a contradiction of terms; after all tests are

specifically designed to discriminate among people. The point, however, is not that tests discriminate. They do. However, the variables of discrimination should be appropriate. For instance, intelligence and achievement are appropriate variables of discrimination. However, when cultural background is the variable of discrimination on a test of intelligence the resultant test score is inappropriately discriminatory.

While the continued search for nondiscriminatory assessment has most recently emphasized arranging the process of assessment so as to be nondiscriminatory, rather than test development per se, interest in the development of nondiscriminatory tests continues.

While attempts to develop culture free tests have proven to be mainly in vain, some persons still recommend the literal translation of currently used standardized tests into other languages (for example, translating an English intelligence test into Spanish). "But language differences are not equated by this procedure when one considers the complex language idioms, colloquialisms, words with multiple meanings, and words with similar but not identical meanings that characterize all languages" (Alley & Foster, 1979, p. 96). An equivalent test cannot be produced by mere translation (Laosa, 1973a).

Types of Nondiscriminatory Testing

Cultural-Fair Tests

Cultural-fair or "unfair" tests usually try to modify the verbal content and speed requirements typically found in IQ tests. Item selection for these tests is based on how well the items take into account the skills, knowledge and experiences which are common ("fair") or uncommon ("unfair") to all groups. Because not all items on an IQ test are administered to every person who takes the test, it is almost

impossible to control for equal numbers of fair or unfair items appearing in any particular administration of the test to all children tested. Therefore, constructing cultural-fair tests is extremely difficult (DeAvila & Havassy, 1974).

Cultural-Specific Tests

The aim of the cultural-specific test movement is to develop intelligence tests designed specifically for every major subculture in our country. In so doing, racial, ethnic, and cultural variables are held constant. The Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity (BITCH), consisting of 100 multiple choice questions (Williams, 1972), is an example of a cultural-specific test designed for a specific black cultural group.

Pretest-Training-Posttest/Improvement with Training Session Model

Budhoff (1972) defines intelligence as the ability to profit from experience and proposes the test-train-retest paradigm similar to that used in the Davis-Eells' Games (Eells, 1951). The resultant gain score is a measure of learning potential. Difficulty in standardization of the training procedures is a drawback to this type of attempt at providing nondiscriminatory testing.

Piagetian Tasks

Assessment of performances on Piagetian tasks seems to indicate similarities in cognitive development of children from different cultures (DeAvila & Havassy, 1975). For example, aspects of development of the Piagetian concept of conservation are measured by the Cartoon Conservation Scale, a group-administered paper-and-pencil test (Struthers & DeAvila, 1967).

Criterion-Referenced Measures

Although the use of criterion-referenced measures (measuring an individual child's performance against an absolute standard of achievement rather than against the performances of other students) has the potential of being quite valuable in nondiscriminatory assessment, they can be misused and contain cultural bias because human beings make the decisions as to establishing criterion levels and establishing the relationship of behavioral criteria to the test items.

Pluralistic Norms for Standardized Tests

The System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) (Mercer, 1979) which is under consideration in this paper, is an example of developing pluralistic norms representing various cultural groups, and subgroups within the larger cultural groups, for already existing standardized tests.

System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA)

One of the major conclusions of the Riverside study on labeling of the mentally retarded was a recommendation for the development of pluralistic norms. One result of that study was the conclusion that "...it was feasible to develop pluralistic norms so that a person's performance could be compared only with other persons who come from similar social-cultural backgrounds and who, presumably, have had similar opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to answer the test questions" (Mercer, 1979, p. 5).

Purpose and Assumptions

The basic purpose of SOMPA related to testing in education is one of psychometric function. The results of SOMPA are used to identify individual differences, rank individuals, make administrative and

placements decisions, and to allocate resources (make financial resources and services available to individuals under categorical programs).

Purposes of SOMPA for children are as follows:

(1) to expand educational opportunities for children.

(2) to reduce stigmatization of children.

(3) to foster multicultural, multilingual educational programs for children (Mercer, 1979, p. 28).

Persons utilizing the SOMPA should be aware of the following assumptions which SOMPA makes:

(1) SOMPA assumes that American society is pluralistic, both culturally and structurally. It "...views contemporary American society as a multicultural society organized around the Anglo core culture..." (Mercer, 1979, p. 27).

(2) SOMPA assumes that there is cultural equality. It "... presumes that all languages and cultures are of equivalent value, and that the dominance of the Anglo cultural tradition in America is the result of historical processes based on economic and political power" (Mercer, 1979, p. 27).

(3) SOMPA assumes that the Anglo core culture will be perpetuated as a matter of public policy. In order to assist those children from non-core cultures within our society, SOMPA assumes that "...it is necessary for the schools to have some means of identifying those children who are likely to have special difficulties coping with the culture of the public school, so that they can be given whatever additional assistance they need in order to participate in the core culture, if they wish to do so" (Mercer, 1979, p. 27).

(4) SOMPA assumes the viability and continuity of non-Anglo cultural traditions.

Assessment Models

SOMPA is composed of three assessment models or paradigms, each designed to look at different aspects of the evaluation procedure. Each model looks at children from different perspectives, providing unique and useful information. The three assessment models are the medical model, the social system model, and the pluralistic model. They "...provide cognitive maps for organizing the assessment process, clarifying decisions, and guiding the actions" (Mercer, 1979, p. 39).

Medical Model. The SOMPA medical model, also called the pathological model, disease model or the deficit model, attempts to screen for biological anomolies and to answer the question, "is the child an intact organism?" Under this model the definition of normal is absence of pathological signs. The definition of abnormal is the presence of pathological signs. The assumptions for assessment that the medical model makes are:

(1) Symptoms are caused by biological pathology

(2) Sociological factors are not relevant to diagnosis or treatment; human organisms are similar across cultures.

Under the medical model, scores can be interpreted transculturally and it is considered a more serious error in assessment to overlook a pathology that is present than to falsely suspect a pathology that is not present, since untreated pathology may lead to more serious pathology.

The SOMPA measures in the medical model include physical dexterity tasks, the Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test, health history inventories, weight by height, visual acuity, and auditory acuity.

Social Systems Model. The SOMPA social system model, also called the social deviance or social adaptivity model, attempts to identify behavioral deviance by answering the question, "Does the child's behavior meet the social expectations of his or her group's?" Normal under this model is viewed as behavior that meets social norms whereas abnormal is viewed as behavior that violates social norms and is socially deviant.

The assumptions of the social system model are that 1) multiple definitions of "normal" behavior are role and system specific, and 2) behavioral norms are politically, not biologically, determined; values of the dominant group are enforced.

Interpretation of scores derived from the social system model is done with the understanding that social system model scores measure achievement in a particular social role in a particular social system in relation to norms of the system; the person's present knowledge or skill. Under this model it is a more serious error in assessing behavior to falsely label behavior as deviant than to falsely label behavior as normal, since negative labeling may result in the placement of a child in a disabling projectory.

Measures within the SOMPA social systems model are the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC) and the WISC-R using standard norms.

Pluralistic Model. The SOMPA pluralistic model, sometimes called the general intelligence model, has the purpose of estimating learning potential. It attempts to answer the question, "What is a child's learning potential? (how intelligent is the child?). Normal under this model refers to scoring an average score for the child's own

group. Abnormal refers to scoring high or low on a test of learning compared to the child's own social-cultural group, a normative classification.

The assumption of the SOMPA pluralistic model are: 1) all tests measure learning and are cultural specific, and 2) inferences regarding "intelligence" are based on comparisons among children who have had similar social-cultural experiences.

Interpretations of scores under the pluralistic model assume that these scores measure knowledge of a particular cultural heritage compared to others from the same subgroup; the person's relative knowledge or skill is compared to their own cultural base.

Under the pluralistic model it is a more serious error to underestimate than to overestimate learning potential, since underestimations may result in the placement of the child on a disabling projectory. Overestimations may enhance educational options.

The SOMPA measures in the pluralistic model include the Social-Cultural Scales and the interpretation of the WISC-R using social-cultural norms.

Procedures Required

The SOMPA requires an interview with the child's mother, father or other principal caretaker and assessment sessions with the child. The information gathered from the parent or caretaker results in scores on the following scales:

1. Social-cultural Scales

   family size

   family structure

socio-economic status

urban acculturation

2. Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC)

family

community

peer relations

nonacademic school roles

earner/consumer

self-maintenance

ABIC average scale score

3. Health history inventories

prenatal/postnatal

trauma

disease and illness

vision

hearing

The direct assessment with the child involves administration of the following tests:

1. Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children--Revised (WISC-R)
2. Physical Dexterity Tasks

ambulation

equilibrium

placement

fine motor sequencing

finger-tongue dexterity

involuntary movement

physical dexterity average scale score

3. Bender Visual-Motor Gestalt Test
4. Weight by height
5. Visual acuity
6. Auditory acuity

Suggested Division of Labor on Assessment Teams Using SOMPA

The following outline for multifactored assessment using SOMPA is recommended:

1. School nurse (student assessment)
   a. vision
   b. hearing
   c. physical dexterity tasks
   d. weight by height
   e. health history (interpretation and/or administration)
2. School social worker (parent interview)
   a. social-cultural scales (family background information)
   b. Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (data collection)
   c. Health history inventories (data collection)
3. School psychologist (student assessment)
   a. WISC-R (administer and interpret as school functioning level)
   b. Estimated Learning Potential (ELP)
   c. Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (interpret)
4. Classroom teacher
   a. Academic grades and/or teacher ratings
   b. Report of student role performance
5. Resource room or special education teacher
   a. Criterion-referenced subject matter tests
   b. Academic achievement tests (norm referenced)

6. Parent
   a. Providing adapted behavior information, health history information and family background information
   b. Participate in planning the Individualized Education Program (IEP)
7. Student (to the extent possible)
   a. Provide input and response to assessment and proposed Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)

SOMPA's Contribution to Nondiscriminatory Assessment

The regulations to be followed in order to be in compliance with PL 94-142 relative to the nondiscriminatory testing of handicapped children are as follows:

Evaluation Procedures

State and local educational agencies shall insure, at a minimum, that:

(a) tests and other evaluation materials:
   (1) are provided and administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication, unless it is clearly not feasible to do so;
   (2) have been validated for the specific purpose for which they are used; and
   (3) are administered by trained personnel in conformance with the instructions provided by their producer;

(b) tests and other evaluation materials include those tailored to assess specific areas of educational need and not merely those which are designed to provide a single general intelligence quotient;

(c) tests are selected and administered so as to best ensure that when a test is administered to a child with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, the test results accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factors the test purports to measure, rather than reflecting the child's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills (except where those skills are the factors which the test purports to measure);

(d) no single procedure is used as the sole criterion for determining an appropriate educational program for a child; and

(e) the evaluation is made by a multidisciplinary team or group of persons, including at least one teacher or other specialist with knowledge in the area of suspected disability.

(f) the child is assessed in all areas related to the suspected disability, including, where appropriate, health, vision, hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communicative status, and motor abilities."

(Federal Register, Vol. 42, No. 163, Tuesday, August 23, 1977, 42496-42497)

SOMPA has contributed to the enactment of these regulations in the following areas:

(1) it is an assessment system; it involves the use of more than one test as called for in Section 121A532(D) of the regulations.

(2) it calls for the use of a multidisciplinary team to perform the assessment as required in Section 121A532(E) of the regulations.

Two years after the adoption of SOMPA in Pueblo (Colorado) District No. 60 Schools, the effects of using SOMPA on the curriculum were described as follows: The school district "...has now changed from a one special education program district to a district which offers a highly sophisticated referral-to-placement process and a finely delineated continuum of 17 special education and extra help services to enable a child to be educated in the most appropriate, least restrictive environment" (Talley, 1979, p. 77-78).

Criticisms

It has been pointed out the use of pluralistic norms on conventional standardized tests for minority children may serve to enhance the status quo of minority children. This procedure, utilized by SOMPA, "...does not provide for analysis of defects in the test nor does it provide the opportunity for minority children to demonstrate excellence in abilities, information, and problem solving strategies that may be stressed within their social-cultural group but not in the majority's" (Alley & Foster, 1979, p. 112). SOMPA has also been criticized from other perspectives which can be classified as conceptual criticisms and statistical criticisms.

Conceptual Criticisms

SOMPA assumes that all racial/ethnic groups have the same biological bases for learning potential (intelligence). Differences in learning potential exist within racial/ethnic groups but not between them. Those persons who do not agree with this assumption would find the use of SOMPA to be undefensible.

SOMPA has also been criticized because of the large number of pupils who have been declassified in school districts where it has been used. Oakland (1979) reports that "as many as two-thirds of the children presently enrolled in EMR classes may be declassified under a new policy of using both WISC-R and ABIC scores" (p. 70). Thus, the special education programming that these students need would be denied to them because of using SOMPA. This is really a utilitarian argument and is aimed at the broader issue of the adoption of the two-part definition for mental retardation, which includes subnormal performance in adaptive behavior as well as intelligence. Likewise, the use of the ELP, rather than conventional WISC-R IQ scores, has been predicted to eliminate 40% of blacks, 75% of Chicanos, and 86% of Indians from eligibility for special education services for the educable mentally retarded, using an IQ or an ELP of 70 as the cutoff score (Clarizio, 1979, p. 86). Thus, SOMPA has been criticized for excluding from special education services those students who really need it.

Statistical Criticisms

Differences of opinion as to what constitutes test bias has led to rejection of the SOMPA for lack of need by those who do not agree that average score differences of IQ test performances of two groups (e.g., blacks and whites) is an indication of unfairness or bias in testing. The more traditional definition of bias is countered by those who propose the psychometric usage of the concept of bias in testing. This definition states that "a test is considered fair for a particular use if the inference drawn from the test score is made with the smallest feasible random error and if there is no constant error in the inference as a function of membership in a particular group"

(Cleary, 1975). Using this definition differences in average scores on tests which are significant and favor the group whose cultural heritage is represented in the test would not be used as evidence of cultural bias. Additional statistical criticisms of SOMPA have been levied even by those who define cultural bias in testing in the more traditional manner.

The measures used in SOMPA were normed in California and subsequent research with the ABIC in Texas indicates that there are differences in Mexican-American children in Texas as compared with those in California. "The California-based norms provided in the ABIC may not reflect children's characteristics nationally. Caution should be employed in using the norms for the new measures and in determining the ELP's derived from the California-based regression equations" (Oakland, 1979, p. 70). The normative base of the SOMPA should be broadened.

The use of the ELP has also come under attack for lack of validity. While conventional WISC-R IQ scores are highly predictive of school success using the criterion of academic achievement, it is not entirely clear what criteria would provide a fair test of the ELP's predictive validity. Certainly academic success under the conditions of traditional school curricula would not suffice. Therefore, while the use of the ELP seems rationale and potentially valuable "...no empirical evidence has been presented to demonstrate that ELP's are more valid or useful than SFL's" (WISC-R IQ scores) (Brown, 1979, p. 46). Thus, for many, the use of ELP's in making decisions about children does not seem justified.

SOMPA has also been criticized because of its failure to interview the teacher and provide "...information on the school as a social,

psychological, or academic system" (Oakland, 1979, p. 69). SOMPA, however, was not designed as a totally inclusive assessment system. In addition to SOMPA an evaluation of the child's school situation from an ecological perspective, as well as measures of academic achievement and other attributes (utilizing observations, interviews, and record reviews), is certainly expected for an assessment that purports to be comprehensive and nondiscriminatory.

Perhaps the most compelling and comprehensive criticism of SOMPA, and the use of pluralistic norms in general, comes from those who believe that "evaluating a child's performance relative to other children from the same social-cultural group...will not solve the educational plight of disadvantaged children.... Statistical adjustments in test scores and prediction formula hold little promise as a means of correcting educational inequities" (Clarizio, 1979, p. 87).

SOMPA was not designed to correct all educational inequities. It attempts to correct only one, the misclassification and misplacement of minority children. To this end, it has provided a strong beginning.

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